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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 NICOSIA 000475

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SUBJECT: AKEL FERMENT DENTS SENSE OF INEVITABLE PAPADOPOULOS SECOND TERM

Ref: Nicosia 426

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: As late as mid-May, Communist party AKEL looked certain to back the re-election of Cypriot President Tassos Papadopoulos and the continuation of the three-party (AKEL, EDEK, DIKO) governing coalition. Papadopoulos likely considered the Communists' support a given when he revealed May 15 that he would stand in the February 2008 election regardless of whether AKEL or the other parties had blessed his decision. The President's display of confidence -- or arrogance, some say -- seems to have unleashed an unintended consequence that has the island abuzz. In a first, AKEL's Central Committee May 21 tabled the possible presidential candidacy of Secretary General Dimitris Christofias, tasking its base organizations with choosing between Papadopoulos and Christofias as AKEL's preferred standard-bearer (the results are not binding, however; the final decision will not come until the party congress in early July.)

12. (SBU) Pundits' first reaction was to characterize AKEL's about-face as a tactical maneuver aimed at securing further concessions from Papadopoulos in his second term. Developments since -- a high-profile May 30 meeting between Papadopoulos and Christofias, public bickering between DIKO and AKEL leadership, and preliminary polling that showed Christofias winning over 85 percent of party voters -- would seem to disprove this theory, however. Regardless of AKEL's final decision, a bland presidential race suddenly seems spicier, and the once-strong sense of the inevitability of a second Papadopoulos term has been shaken. END SUMMARY.

Backed Into a Corner, AKEL Fights Back

13. (SBU) Two days after receiving partner EDEK's endorsement, and assured of his own DIKO party's support in February, Tassos

Papadopoulos revealed May 15 his intention to seek re-election. The President's decision, purportedly taken without first consulting AKEL, left Communist leaders red-faced and seething (Reftel). Further, many rank-and-filers questioned how many more embarrassing moments the future might hold for their party, should AKEL support deliver Papadopoulos a second term. Prominent editorialists questioned whether the President might even dump the Communists once he took office in February, much like former Cypriot President Spyros Kyprianou did to his partners after winning re-election in 1983.

14. (SBU) Reacting to the party base's dissatisfaction and dismay over the President's intentions, AKEL's Central Committee decided May 21 to inaugurate a grass-roots debate at the party's 600-plus local branches, to culminate in a run-off between Christofias and Papadopoulos to select the party's 2008 nominee. This is the first time since Cyprus's independence in 1960 that AKEL formally has considered entering its own candidate in a presidential election. Party officials repeatedly have stressed, however, that the result of the internal vote will not be binding for the Central Committee, which will meet again in late June to formulate its official candidate proposal for the July 8 Congress. The Congress, AKEL's supreme organ, will then vote to accept or reject the Central Committee's choice (historically, in true Communist fashion, Central Committee proposals are adopted with nearly 100 percent of the Congress vote.)

Early Reaction? Skepticism

15. (U) The media and most political parties initially viewed the AKEL move with skepticism. AKEL's deeply-rooted tendency to avoid risks, coupled with continual reiterations by party officials that their ultimate goal was to preserve the three-party coalition and stop DISY from climbing back into power, suggested the party was simply setting the scene for a hard bargain with Papadopoulos. Such a tack would pressure the President to agree to an election manifesto tailor-made for AKEL's needs -- heavy on social benefits for the middle and working classes, for example -- and help silence those dissidents unhappy with the President's hard-line management of the Cyprus Problem (and AKEL's support thereof.)

16. (SBU) Former Interior Minister and current Mayor of Limassol Andreas Christou, a long-time AKEL member, disagreed with this widely-held view. In a meeting with Embassy officials May 23, Christou claimed that, irrespective of its public insistence that the bases' vote was non-binding, the Central Committee would have no choice but to adopt the outcome, especially if it indicated overwhelming support for Christofias. Supporters of the General Secretary's candidacy fell into three separate groups, the Mayor

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believed: those like Christou himself who disagreed with Papadopoulos's Cyprus Problem policy, those who believed that AKEL had paid a high electoral cost for sharing power with DIKO, and those who simply felt it was Christofias's turn to be elected president. Together, they comprised 70 percent of the party base, Christou calculated.

Intended or Not, Candidacy Gathers Steam

17. (SBU) The tone of general scuttlebutt and media reporting had changed by the long "Cataclismos" weekend (May 26-28), lending more credence to an independent AKEL run for the presidency. A former Foreign Ministry Permanent Secretary (D-equivalent) with reputable sources in AKEL told us May 25 that early results from the base elections showed Christofias garnering between 85 and 100 percent of the vote. The General Secretary's candidacy was all but assured, our contact argued, since AKEL leadership could not ignore such a clear mandate -- especially since the rank-and-file had the power to elect and remove Central Committee members.

18. (SBU) Opposition daily "Politis" has become Christofias's head cheerleader in recent days. Believing his candidacy the only manner of preventing five more years of Tassos Papadopoulos, "Politis"

journalists have dwelled on the inconceivability of the Central Committee siding with the President in 2008, against the will of AKEL's base. Unnamed, high-ranking AKEL sources allegedly told the paper May 26 that officials have tired of being patronized by the coalition's smaller, centrist parties. "What is at stake is the cohesion of AKEL," the source concluded. One particularly optimistic "Politis" story May 27 argued that Christofias would defeat either Papadopoulos or DISY-supported candidate Ioannis Kasoulides in a Round 2 runoff, claiming AKEL would secure the backing of DISY (if the runoff opponent were the President) or DIKO (if Christofias faced Kasoulides), respectively. Finally, the paper May 27 published unofficial results from a number of AKEL's greater-Nicosia base organizations, showing Christofias winning approximately 90 percent of the vote.

¶9. (SBU) AKEL Spokesman and MP Andros Kyprianou, long-considered a strong proponent of a Christofias candidacy, was admittedly evasive in a May 30 discussion with Emboffs. "You'll know our decision July 8," he chuckled. Dismissing those who believed AKEL had tabled the General Secretary's candidacy in anger over a perceived Papadopoulos slight, Kyprianou asserted that the Political Bureau had begun deliberating the move a year ago. Similarly, he discounted the reliability of "Politis's" electoral figures, noting that barely ten percent of the vote had come in.

¶10. (SBU) Under party by-laws, the Central Committee was free to formulate its proposal to the Congress as it saw fit. That said, Kyprianou, too, doubted the body would overturn a 90-10 or 80-20 vote in order to recommend backing Papadopoulos. A Christofias candidacy would spell the end of the three-party coalition, he added, with AKEL ordering its four ministers to resign. Reacting defensively to a query over the likelihood of dissension within AKEL ranks over abandoning the coalition -- since many higher-ups would lose cushy jobs and other perks -- Kyprianou retorted that he had gained nothing from the party tie-up. "There is no distance between the base and the leadership," he insisted.

"Summit" Sheds Little Light

¶11. (U) The media predicted fireworks at the May 30 Papadopoulos-Christofias meeting and questioned whether the AKEL leader would reveal his future plans to the President. Christofias was in no mood to satisfy reporters' demands for information at the conclusion of the gathering, however, revealing only that the men "had discussed the gamut of issues." Both "Politis" and pro-government "Phileleftheros" ran similar headlines May 31, explaining that AKEL sought a temporary "velvet divorce" -- in other words, its decision to run Christofias against Papadopoulos in Round 1 should not keep the coalition partners from rejoining forces in Round 2, should only one of them advance.

¶12. (U) "Velvety" could hardly describe the atmospherics at a televised May 30 gathering of coalition figures Yiorgos Colocassides (DIKO), Andros Kyprianou, and Yiorgos Barnabas (EDEK). Their discussion over various Round 1 / Round 2 scenarios quickly descended into histrionics, chiefly between the DIKO and AKEL representatives. Kyprianou urged his coalition mates to cooperate primarily to ensure that opposition DISY not return to power. Responding, Colocassides claimed DIKO was focused on offense -- cooperating to elect the coalition's chosen candidate -- and not on defending the office from any one party.

Comment:

¶13. (SBU) Developments of the last ten days have shaken the widely-held belief that AKEL's support for Tassos Papadopoulos was iron-clad. According to Mayor Christou, his party "finally will do the proper thing," assuaging the majority of rank-and-file members who never accepted the utility of the AKEL-DIKO marriage and "who want no link to the politician who could be responsible for the permanent partition of the island." Undoubtedly, AKEL's base will offer a strong vote of confidence in leader Christofias, presenting the Central Committee with a difficult decision: ignore the masses' wishes in order to back a candidate (Papadopoulos) who, despite his

unpopularity in AKEL circles, offers sure victory in February, or honor the base's wishes to put forth an AKEL candidate who still appears unelectable in the second round. We recently learned that a north Nicosia university purchased a \$10 million IBM supercomputer, allegedly the 57th most powerful machine in the world. It could get a lot of use figuring the possible permutations of the suddenly interesting race. One thing is fairly clear, however: a genuine three-party contest will undermine the air of inevitability that Tassos Papadopoulos is a shoo-in for a second five-year term.

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